

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL BRIAN BALFE, U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD, COMMANDER, 27TH INFANTRY BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 8:30 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, MAY 15, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs): Colonel Balfe, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable this morning.

And for those of you who don't know, Colonel Balfe is the new commander of Task Force Phoenix. He's also the commander of the 27th Brigade Combat Team from the New York Army National Guard.

Colonel Balfe, thanks for joining us this morning. Have you got an opening statement for us this morning?

COL. BALFE: I do. First of all, I'd just like to thank you and the bloggers that are in attendance. It's my pleasure to speak with you this morning from D.C. there and early evening here in Afghanistan. It's my pleasure to do this.

And I would like to also state that I really appreciate the fact that you're doing what you're doing. Without your interest and your coverage, we'd be over here all alone. So with regard to an opening statement and some background information, I would just like to say that the 27th Infantry Brigade Combat Team out of New York was selected for this mission over a year ago. We're the first National Guard unit.

And my command was mobilized under the new one-year DA mobilization policy. We completed a fairly robust three-month or three-iteration, I should say, pre-mobilization training cycle and more than two months of post-mobilization training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

We were the -- we have been the largest unit that has rotated through FOB Patriot at Fort Bragg. And soldiers from this command have served at Ground Zero, following the 9/11 attacks.

Members of the New York Army National Guard have extensive homeland defense experience, as you might imagine, as a result of that, covering such things as bridges, tunnels, airports, borders, et cetera.

More than a third of my command, at least from the 27th Brigade, I can speak to at this point, have served in Iraq. There are more than 1,700 soldiers from New York here. And the task force -- the entire task force, the

Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix XII, consists of active, Guard, Reserve, all services, components, coalition partners for a total of 8,500 plus soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen. And we are located in some 240 field locations across the entire country of Afghanistan.

With that, I'll open it up to your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much, sir.

Troy, you were first online. Why don't you get us started?

Q Sure. Hey, sir, how are you doing? This is First Sergeant Troy Steward out of Buffalo.

COL. BALFE: Hey, Troy, how are you? I don't often -- (inaudible) -- first name, but it's a pleasure to speak with you. And I hope you and your wife are doing well. Your son certainly is. We're all proud of him.

Q Good. Thank you, sir. Yeah, he told me he saw you the other day.

I guess one of my first questions -- go around the one-year total missions, of course, the 27th being the first one to do that total. How -- I guess, do you see that as an -- I mean, I'm sure it will be nice to be there and back in one year, but do you see it as an inhibitor or do you see that it's a negative or is it a positive for the mission itself to essentially only do nine to 10 months on the ground, and less than that, when you consider the RIPTOAs and all that stuff?

COL. BALFE: That's a really good question. It's a fair question as well. Quite frankly, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to answer it fully until I've gotten to the end of the tour. By that time, hopefully it won't be too late -- and what I mean by that is I hope that we can get maximum benefit from the earnest nine months that we'll do here after the TOA. In total, it really is about 10 months on the ground with the additional two months spent in post-mobilization training. I think for many, many reasons both personal, political as well as, you know, just how it fits with the National Guard, there's some definite advantages to it. So I certainly understand why our superiors and the civilian chain, you know, came to this conclusion.

So from that perspective, I think it is a positive.

With regard to the mission itself, both strategically and tactically, I will reserve final comment on that, probably until the end of this -- of the tour. But my sense is, after speaking with a number of our coalition partners, many of which who do four month tours, six month tours, some nine months -- we've got a Marine contingent that's with us that's going to be doing police mentoring in the south and the west, they're doing basically a seven-month tour. I think that while it may not be the most ideal -- and again, I hesitate to even say it's not ideal -- but while it might not be ideal, I do think it is a very good compromise, both from a National Guard point of view, from a personal point of view -- when I say personal, I don't necessarily mean myself, I mean from a soldier care point of view, from a civilian employer point of view, from a family point of view, because I do believe in the final analysis we're going to get an awful lot done toward our mission in those nine earnest months of training and mentoring the Afghan national security forces.

Q All right. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. BALFE: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Andrew?

Q Good afternoon -- or good evening, Colonel. Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer.

COL. BALFE: Hi, Andrew. How are you?

Q Good, thanks. Also, Colonel Fanning, good to meet you also, sir.

COL. BALFE: He's waving. He says thanks.

Q Appreciate that.

Colonel, you mentioned a second ago that about one-third of your soldiers have served previously in Iraq. Do you see a difference in the situation on the ground in the two AOs, and do you see a difference in the trainings -- (inaudible)? COL. BALFE: Well, I'm not an expert on Iraq. I have not deployed to Iraq or served in Iraq, so I can only speak to what I know from military circles, from reading, from the news, et cetera. I do think that Afghanistan and Iraq, while they're in the same theater of operations, they are very different with regard to where they are in their current state, the requirements for both AOs, or areas of operations.

And if I could just mention a few things. I think that the -- the Afghan people have been at war for 30-plus years, not to mention their historical background is flush with war. But certainly for the last 30-some odd years, they've been a country at war. So there really is not an economy to speak of.

There is not any industry to speak of. There are not any -- there is not any infrastructure to speak of. So from those perspectives, it's just a very different landscape.

By the same token, however, the Afghan people are robust. They're resilient. They clearly are fighters, they are warriors, have no doubt about that. But they are not -- while they are a fighting -- while they have a fighting tradition, they are not used to a national police force, so they haven't had one. That is a new concept. We are building one with them, and it's based or predicated on the rule of law. There are some corruption issues here in Afghanistan, which we are working through.

So it is -- I'm not an expert on Iraq, so it's difficult for me to provide a fair comparison or comparison and contrast, but I will tell you that I do think they are different, yet equal.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Scott. Scott, you still with us? All right. Christopher?

Q Good morning, sir. If I understand correctly, you'll be training new Afghan National Army battalions?

COL. BALFE: We have the charter to train both the -- train and mentor both -- all of the Afghan national security forces, which consist of the Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police, the border police. And quite frankly, if I speak to the army for a moment, they are constructed by corps, there's five corps. Those corps have brigades. Those brigades have battalions, kandaks, and those kandaks have companies, or koys (ph). And roughly speaking, one of their corps looks similar to an American division.

Yes, we are training the total Afghan national security forces, made up of the Army and the police, and the Army and the police are structured much the same as ours. On the police side of the house, they have regional police headquarters, provincial police headquarters, and then district police headquarters. A provincial headquarters is, I guess, you know, probably similar to a state in the United States, and a district is somewhat similar to a townie (ph) inside a state, if I had to kind of draw some analogies.

Q I was wondering, are you also training combat support and combat service support battalions for the Afghan army? COL. BALFE: Yes, we do. So in the army we have -- you know, the brigades are made up of battalions, as I said, and then companies, and there are infantry or -- you know, combat infantry type units. There are also CS, CSS-type units as well, to include artillery and logistics, et cetera.

Q And how -- I'm sorry -- I'll pass.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right.

Scott, did you join us again?

Q Yes. Sorry, I fell out there for some reason.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Colonel, good evening on your side. This is Scott Kesterson. I was with the 41st Brigade for a year in their tour in Afghanistan.

COL. BALFE: Yes. I remember hearing about you from General Doug Pritt.

Q (Laughs.) He's a good man. And we're in the process right now of actually finishing this film, "At War," which was on that year. I do have a question for you.

I mean, one of the things that I noticed when I was there, and it was a pretty regular issue with -- (off mike) -- was getting supplies and support. They seemed to be the ones that probably took the greatest hit, on not getting what they needed, when supplies and support were pretty well taken care of back at the main central bases, like CAF and Phoenix.

What type of things have you addressed to try to ensure that the supplies and support get as far out basically to the point of -- (off mike)?

COL. BALFE: Yeah, that's a fair question. And quite frankly we still struggle with that.

We have in fact since the 41st was here, we have greatly increased the number of forward operating bases or FOBs that we actually occupy, therefore must resupply. And we've done that by continuing to remain in some of the winter camps that were formerly only summer camps.

Now, how have we addressed some of those issues, of support, and the lengthening lines of support and logistics and whatnot? First of all, I'm happy to say that we have the 101st Airborne with us. And the 101st Airborne just so happens to have a larger number of rotary ring assets available.

Now, those assets are not necessarily assets that can be utilized countrywide without prior planning, without cross-border coordination with the other regional commands and whatnot.

But the fact of the matter remains they do have a larger number of rotary wing assets, and therefore we do have the capability to use them.

The other thing that we're doing is, while we have pushed out to ever -- an ever-increasing number of forward operating bases and our people are out there, so too are obviously the ANA, the Afghan National Army, and the Afghan National Police. And we have regular CDS drops that we do. We have -- and that's really more during the inclement or winter time, which we haven't experienced yet.

But we also -- we have sent, and I think the 41st and the 218th before us did the same thing, but we have sent -- taken our logistics task force and sent them down, broken them up into forward logistic elements and sent them down as far down as we can get. And then traditionally what we do is the -- on the far end, or the far edge or the tip of the spear, those ETTs or PMTs work with their ARSIC, their Integration Command, or their ARCAC (sp), the Army command, or the ARPAC, the police command, to convoy and ferry logistics back and forth.

Is it easy? No. Is it perfect? No. I will tell you that the way I see my job as the commander of this task force and the way that my staff operates is we operate in total support of the downrange units. I hold my staff and my subordinate commands at the ARSICs, ARCACs (sp) and ARPACs responsible for ensuring that our soldiers at the tip of the spear, as you say, so that our soldiers at the tip of the spear are well-cared for.

Q Colonel, one quick --

COL. BALFE: I hope that answers --

Q Thank you for the answer. I have one quick follow-up on that. I understand -- actually, I was speaking with Major Gary Repp (sp) recently. I understand that you did quite a bit of leaning out of --(inaudible) -- trying to push as much as you can downrange, is that correct?

COL. BALFE: I'm sorry. I missed the last part. I did hear Gary Repp (sp), who did work with us, but -- and for us, in fact, for a while, but I actually missed the last part of that as far as pushing something out. I didn't get that -- Q What I was understanding is you did -- your group did quite an effort to try to lean down a lot of your command staff and try to push as much as you can (of key ?) personnel-wise downrange. Is that correct?

COL. BALFE: Yes. So now I follow. Yes, that's exactly what we've tried to do. And really one of the points that supports that is what we've done with regard to our logistics task force. Now, quite frankly, we've had to also do that with our security forces. We have some 900 plus or minus New York soldiers that make up the SECFOR, or the Security Force Task Force.

And what we've done is we've sent virtually -- jeez, I'd probably say, you know, 700 plus of those downrange.

Now why have done that? Well, we've done that for two reasons. We've done that to get more people, as you say, in the fight or downrange to work with our ANA and ANP counterparts. We've also done that because there is a severe shortage of mentoring personnel in the Task Force. We are -- you know, depending on how you count it, we are somewhere around 3,000 plus mentors short at this time.

Now, that's not new news. The 218th had the same issue. The 41st actually did -- I think they were the first ones to do work against the new requirements that they saw coming down the road with regard to the United States picking up, in addition to the army mentoring tasks, the police mentoring mission and therefore put the requirement to -- the request for a forces requirement together for the additional forces for the police mentoring teams. And unfortunately, while that RFF -- RFF (620 mod 2 ?) -- has been validated, it has yet to be sourced.

Q Okay.

COL. BALFE: And I'd be remiss if I didn't finish the rest of that story. The rest of the story is we are fortunate -- unlike the 218th from South Carolina, we are fortunate in that we have some 1,100 plus Marines that have joined us. They're on the ground. They're working with us. We're in the process of building out forward operating bases for their use so that they can operate in nine or ten different districts in both the south and the west and supplement our forces that are currently on the ground with regard to police mentoring.

Q That's something --

COL. BALFE: So to net it out, yes, we've done everything we possibly can to push as many resources -- personnel, equipment, et cetera -- as far forward or as far downrange as possible.

I do believe over the next six to eight months we'll continue to do that, where we'll probably have to take from -- (inaudible) -- at headquarters-type location and continue to push them forward downrange to continue to do our mentoring mission.

Q Outstanding. Thank you, Colonel. MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. BALFE: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: All right. Got a few minutes left here. Anybody else? Anybody have any follow-up questions?

Q I got --

Q Hey, this is Troy.

MR. HOLT: Yes, Troy.

Q Yes, sir. Recently there was a report -- in the last few days -- saying that the planned or projected spring offensive by ACM or any forces is probably 50 percent less than what they'd seen the previous years.

However, because of the recent bombing in Farah this morning, which is -- it's conflicting reports, whether that's someone hiding in a burqa or whether it was a VBIED -- the teacher assassination in Kunduz, which of course is a less volatile area up north, et cetera -- the attacks may be 50 percent less, but are you seeing, based on what you were handed over from the 218th or what you've seen since you've been in country, are those attacks more damaging, more violent, versus just the small direct-fire kind of quick IED ambush attacks that usually happen in the spring offensive?

COL. BALFE: Well, Troy, for the month that I've been here, or month or so that I've been here, and certainly my debriefs and the RIP and what I learned during the RIP and what I learned during the RIP in two prior PDSSs, I guess I would say to this point things seem to be maybe not as fast-paced, maybe not as -- even as devastating with regard to insurgent activities.

However, we do continue to see, you know, small TICs (sp), small- arms fires, some complex ambushes and things like that. But it only takes one. If you're the person, the team, you know, the soldier, you know, who's affected by that, it really doesn't matter if it's big, small, more than last year or less than last year. You know, so quite frankly, I don't get stuck on that.

I will tell you that it's an ever-present danger. There's's not a single day, I believe, since we've been here that has gone by when nothing occurred. I mean, something always occurs. There's always an IED found or an IED that explodes or a TIC (sp), whether it be just small-arms fire and RPGs, or whether it be an ambush or a complex ambush.

I mean, the bottom line is, we did our TOA, conducted our TOA on the 26th of April, which was a Saturday. Myself, my command sergeant major, Sergeant Major Piavorski (sp), my aide-de-camp, Second Lieutenant Green (sp), and my chief of staff, Colonel Ray Shields (sp), were honored guests -- among others, but certainly, from our perspective, were honored guests at the annual national parade which celebrates the victory of the Afghanistans over the Soviet occupation.

And we were sitting in the stands probably, I don't know, just to the left of President Karzai. He had just finished his inspection of the troops. They were doing a 21-gun salute. And during that 21-gun salute -- and I know you all know this, because it was well reported on CNN and other media outlets -- there was an assassination attempt with small-arms fires and grenades. We were right there, sitting right there. So at that moment that was pretty important to us.

I will tell you that as a result of that, security in the city of Kabul, in the Kabul province, has been extremely tight. We're doing an awful lot of work -- at least we're trying to do an awful lot of work to help that, to assist, with our ARSIC Kabul folks, which are one of the six ARSICs that report into my organization. And really it hasn't let up since then. You mentioned a couple things, you know, recent events today and just a day or two ago, both out

west and up north. The bottom line is, it's hard for me to say whether or not it's more, it's less, it's the same.

I do believe that if it is more, and I think your sense is that it may be less, but I can tell you, if it is more or if it's not yet more but may become more, it is because the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are leading the effort. It is clearly our training paradigm, as it probably was yours, to get the Afghans to lead the way, to lead from the front, and that's clearly what we believe and that's what we're doing. They, and we together with them as their mentors and trainers, are out in a greater number of locations, both from a FOB perspective because of the stay in the winter camps and because they're conducting additional operations. So we're out there and we are certainly taking the fight to the insurgents.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right.

COL. BALFE: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And I think, Andrew, you had one more?

Q Yeah, Colonel. A quick question. When I was out at Camp Black Horse last year, they had an Afghan national tank battalion in training. Are they spun up or are they still training?

COL. BALFE: Oh. Well, let's see. They're still training. And quite frankly, they have been a topic of discussion between myself and the CSTC-A commander, Major General Cone, as well as the lead mentor for the army in the Central Region, and that is Marine Colonel Jeff Haynes (sp). The bottom line is, their equipment has been taken through full TI, an assessment.

It is just not where we would like it to be. So we have, while they are a tank battalion, while they also have a mech battalion, they are currently being trained as infantry. They're currently being fought as infantry and they're being assessed as infantry.

The future may hold a different outlook for them. But for right now, while they do fall underneath an armor tashkeel or an armor MTO&E, they are trained, mentored and fighting as an infantry force.

It just so happened that they were recently in an operation. It just ended a couple days ago. And they did use their mechanized infantry in a mechanized role, where they were mounted. They dismounted. They remounted in conjunction with a larger operation. And they did quite well.

So it remains to be seen what will happen from a mechanized infantry point of view. But right now, because of the state of their equipment, from an armor point of view, they are being trained, mentored and fighting as an infantry force.

Q Jack, have we got time for a follow-up?

MR. HOLT: Just real quick, yeah.

Q Okay.



Colonel, was that, and maybe this is unfair, because you weren't there back then. They were being trained by the Germans. Is this a question then of Afghan problems, or because the Germans didn't do a good job?

COL. BALFE: Oh, no, I don't think it has anything to do with a lack of skill, with regard to either the mentors or the Afghans themselves. It really is an equipment issue. Their tanks just aren't fully mission-capable at this point in time.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

And sir, we're about out of time here, but do appreciate you coming with us, Colonel Brian Balfe with the Bloggers Roundtable this morning. He's the commander of Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix VII and the commander of the 27th Brigade Combat Team, in charge of that mission in Afghanistan right now. And sir, I know you're just getting started on the ground there. But I'm hoping we can follow up with maybe some regular discussion along the way through your deployment.

COL. BALFE: Jack, it would be my pleasure. And again I'm honored to be speaking with you today. And I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for telling our story.

It's important for my soldiers. It's important for the Afghan people and the Afghan government. And you know, bottom line is, we're indebted to you for carrying our stories to the American people and elsewhere.

Thank you.

END.